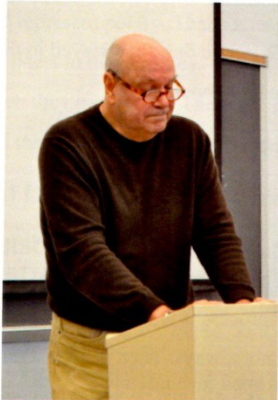


Interview with Texas State Poet Laureate, Dave Parsons

Interview by Calliope, Transcription by Udo Hintze

UDO
HINTZE



Dave Parsons, the 2011 Texas Poet Laureate, teaches creative writing, handball, and racquetball at LSC-Montgomery. He is founder and Co-Director of the Montgomery County Literary Arts Council Writers in Performance Series and Chairman of the Greater Conroe Arts Alliance. In 2005 he was named Montgomery County Poet Laureate. Parsons has published three collections of poetry. His first book, *Editing Sky* (1999), won the 1999 Texas Review Poetry Prize and a 2000 Violet Crown Book Awards Special Citation. His latest collection, *Feathering Deep* (2011), was published by Texas Review Press/Texas A&M University Press Consortium. Later this year, his *New and Selected Poems* will be published by TCU Press.

Calliope is Lone Star College-Tomball's creative writing club, and it was formed to promote creative writing among students and alumni. The club holds bi-monthly meetings at which members share writing, discuss writing activities within the community and on campus, plan events, and discuss writing-related topics. As well, the club hosts one open mic per semester. Any student or former student interested in writing is welcome to join.

In the fall of 2011, Calliope and *Inkling* invited Dave Parsons to the LSC-Tomball campus for an interview and reading. The event was informal and open to students, staff, and community members. On November 29, 2011, Parsons met with a Tomball audience. He was generous and affable, reading several works for the gathering and discussing writing and life openly and warmly with Calliope interviewers. We're pleased to include the interview (really, more of a conversation) he had with Calliope members in this volume of *Inkling*.

CALLIOPE: How long have you been writing poetry?

PARSONS: Since college, when I was in my twenties.

CALLIOPE: Can you talk about the role poetry has played in your life?

PARSONS: It saved my life for all practical purposes, in that one of the reasons I started writing poetry was to stop hitting people. I was a violent person when I was younger, and I learned I could write a poem,

and it expended the same amount of energy as getting in a fight. I got no stitches and didn't get arrested. It made me more civilized and brought me into society. Really, I feel like I need to write.

CALLIOPE: You were a violent person? Were you boxing or playing football?

PARSONS: No, I was just violent. I came out of the Marine Corps in '62, active duty, and stayed in the Reserves for eight years. I was a Squad Leader and then a Recon Boat Team Leader.

CALLIOPE: What you think is the most important advice for aspiring poets?

PARSONS: Read. The key to being a successful poet is finding your voice—because everyone has—and I really mean literally *everyone* has—something unique to say. We're all individuals, right? We're like snowflakes. We all have something to report that's individual and unique and that would be interesting to everybody. But you have to find your voice to do that. The process is to find another poet whose voice is similar to yours. It usually relates to their experience but not always. Then just try it on. Try them as a model, and then eventually you'll be able to cast them off, and it'll just be you. You can't do it in two weeks. It's a process because it comes from reading a lot of different voices and seeing what's working for them that might work for you.

CALLIOPE: It's a discovery.

PARSONS: Yes—it's a journey, and don't be in a hurry. There's pressure to publish because you think you can say you're a poet if you publish, but that's not true. You're a poet if you're writing, if you're working on the process. One thing the poet Ed Hirsch says all the time is that he hates it when people say poetry is a craft. It's not a craft. It's an art. The thing that makes art successful is that it's a unique entity that ends up being what we keep and treasure. That's what you're trying for. You're not making a quilt that's like everybody else's quilt. You're doing something so unique that it's going to be as unique as you. And even though it's going to have its own life, it's coming out of your uniqueness, so it's art. That's the thing I always come back to when I feel like I've gone off my road—and I usually go off the road by trying to please someone else.

CALLIOPE: The idea of voice—this is a very complex thing for new writers to try to grasp, and sometimes even established poets find it difficult.

PARSONS: It's really difficult to identify. I guess the closest thing to describing it is that when you read someone, even if you're reading Stephen King, you can know without seeing the title of the book that you're reading Stephen King. That's his voice. That's something identifiable.

CALLIOPE: What are your responsibilities as Poet Laureate?

53

PARSONS: You're representative of a lot of great poets in Texas, and one of the best things you get from it is a lot of invitations like this. I'll be going to Abilene College, Tarlington State University, and Texas A&M in the next couple of months. I never got those invitations before. So, you get to go to these places and represent poetry. That's a responsibility, and it's also good for you because you get to experience all the poets in those places. You sit there, and they read, and you think: I'm glad they didn't see that guy

when they picked me. There are great writers in this state. That's the joy of it—you get to go meet them, and they lionize you everywhere you go because you're the designated person that year.

CALLIOPE: Do you have to write occasional poems?

PARSONS: They opened a new flag park in Conroe called The Lone Star Monument and Historical Flag Park, and because I was poet laureate of Montgomery County, I had to write a poem for that event, which is a difficult thing for me to do. I do not like it. So, yes, that has happened.

CALLIOPE: Do you ever have something published and wish you could change it later?

PARSONS: Oh yeah, all the time. In fact, my *New and Selected Poems* will be published by TCU Press this year as part of the laureate series, so I had to pick poems out of three books, and then we put new poems in. I changed which poems I wanted eight or nine times.

I think all artists feel that way. Some famous artist was recently caught sneaking into the New York Museum of Art. He was trying to change a painting in the permanent exhibit.

CALLIOPE: Are you ever surprised or appalled by responses to your work?

PARSONS: Well, that's interesting. One of my most successful poems is entitled "Memories of Camp Matthews," and it's about learning how to shoot in the Marines. I composed it in Finnish Rhapsody, a form invented by the poet John Ashbery. In this form, you have two independent clauses in each line saying the same thing in a different way. I wrote it as an assignment in graduate school, so I didn't take it seriously. Then, when I was getting ready to do my thesis, my advisor, Ed Hirsch, said, "You need one more poem." I didn't have any more poems. All I had was this exercise, so I used it as a stopgap.

When I was done with school, I didn't send it out for publication until finally I had to send five poems to somebody, and I had only four, so I just grabbed it and stuck it in. Well, they published the poem, and I thought, God this poem must be better than I thought it was. Four months later, the editor said, "Hey—one of your poems was chosen for an anthology." When I asked which one, he said, "Memories of Camp Matthews." I was like, "What? You've got to be kidding me!" So now that's one of my favorite poems.

54

CALLIOPE: Another great poem of yours is "Comforter." There's a particularly powerful line that stands out towards the end: "what was saved without being chosen." Could you elaborate on what that line means to you?

PARSONS: In that particular poem, the idea was that in any close relationship there are moments that become poignant. They're surprising sometimes—yet you realize that this is something you'll never forget. It may not mean anything to someone else. It's a very personal, intimate memory, and it can be the most benign of moments.

I have a poem called, "Evidence" in my new book, and it's about one morning seeing my wife's hair in the sink. We're the opposite of each other—I'm a slob, and she's the type who would immediately get that hair out of the sink. I loved seeing it there because it was symbolic and emblematic of us living together. It's not exactly something you would think you'd write a poem about—finding hair in the sink—but it triggered a poem.

CALLIOPE: It's absolutely beautiful.

PARSONS: Wow, thank you.

CALLIOPE: One of the things critics frequently say about your work is that the poems simultaneously achieve intimacy and universal appeal. Did you employ any specific techniques to create that balance?

PARSONS: Well, I have to say this—in writing advertising copy, which I did for twenty years, that's all you're concerned with—audience and universal appeal. Really, though, it's a two-edged sword. You catch yourself writing ad copy again, which could be problematic, yet I think it's one of the things that helped me, if what they say is true.

The motion of the poem, the image and all that is irrepressible—that's what I have to write. But whenever I go back with that other side of my brain and start editing, I'm aware, just like I am writing ad copy, of the reader. So I think that's been very helpful. You know, the poet Robert Phillips was in advertising for years and years, and if there's anyone I identify with as a poet, it's him. I don't write like him. I wish I did. I've always told him when my poems grow up, they're going to be just like his.

You can see in his work that he's always aware of the reader, and some people are never aware when they're editing their work. They just feel that the thing is what it is, and I have respect for that too. I think, generally, if it's a good poem, it's going to relate to someone. Also, this lack of awareness is what has come with the Billy Collins era of poetry. I've got mixed emotions about it. Billy Collins was the first poet on the national scene who really wrote approachable poetry that even a kid could get. In some ways,

55

it was great because it freed people up. They didn't have this inhibition about poetry that it had to be some kind of code. But, on the other hand, it also caused a lot of not so good poems to be written.

CALLIOPE: Some people are scared by not having the rules anymore.

PARSONS: I've always liked to describe form poetry like a cup you pour tea into. Free verse is poetry you pour onto the table. It makes a form, and that's the form that works. But now, especially with language poetry, it just seems there is no transforming moment. For me there has to be a transforming moment—a point when the poem is talking about something besides what it's talking about—when there are two levels of communication going on, when there are writing strategies like metaphor and simile, and it's not just gimmicky language. Some of this new poetry is just gimmicky language. I don't think it really rises to the level of true poetry.

CALLIOPE: Can you give an example of what you mean by gimmicky language?

PARSONS: When you get to the end of the poem and realize the poet has talked about something in our lives, and he's done it in a very clever way, but there are no writing strategies. There are no metaphors, no similes, no message beyond the message. We're in a time of compressing everything. We're all looking for things we can do quickly, like read a poem quickly and easily understand it. There's nothing like, "I've got to read this again." That's another thing about it: you read it and you don't have to read it again. There's no reason to read it again. There's no reason to ponder it. It has no depth. It is what it is. It's simply like talking to someone who's very intelligent and clever.

CALLIOPE: So it's cleverness without the depth?

PARSONS: Right. I think that's a good way to put it.

CALLIOPE: Did you ever think you would be a poet laureate and writer?

PARSONS: No, not until I entered the creative writing world through my teacher, Stanley Plumly. I had no intention of doing that. I made a really good living in advertising, and for me to decide to be a poet—I almost lost my marriage over it . . . again. Luckily, I didn't, but it was like: "What? What are you doing? Are you crazy?" I quit advertising and took a fellowship at the University of Houston where the money earned went to pay tuition. It was a stupid business move. I guess I was 41, so to do that at that age was like . . .

CALLIOPE: . . . huge. Thank you for doing that.

PARSONS: Oh, thank you.

56

CALLIOPE: When you write a poem, do you let the form dictate the subject matter, or do you know in advance that you'll write in, say, couplets?

PARSONS: No—I absolutely let the poem dictate the form every time. Sometimes, different aspects of the poem dictate it. If the poem is about two people, or myself and another person, I use couplets because it feels it ought to be couplets. I have a poem in *Feathering Deep* that is probably the most abstract looking of all my poems. It's about a previous marriage, and it needed to be in that form to convey that situation. I can't even tell you why. You just know when you see it on the page that it is working.

CALLIOPE: Who are the teachers you feel impacted you the most?

PARSONS: Stanley Plumly. He absolutely formed what I think about not only my writing, but about teaching writing, approaching the poem with aspiring writers. You just can't teach it. You're kind of there to show where the potholes are, but he was brilliant.

I'm a failed poet, the kind of writers that taught me, I should be Poet Laureate of the United States. That's how good they were. I mean they were just wonderful. And I was just lucky to have them. I had Robert Pinsky, Howard Moss, poetry editor for *The New Yorker* for thirty years, Ed Hirsch, Gary Hongo, Frank Bidart, and Lisa Ziedner—she's fiction. I also had Richard Howard. He was the professor who came into the classroom and said, "Don't raise your hand to ask any questions. If you have a question see me after class and get an appointment—I've got too much to say." Everybody was like, what arrogance . . . you could just see the class reaction, and after thirty minutes we realized he was right—he had too much to say! (laughs) He was brilliant.

CALLIOPE: Whose writing style impacted you the most?

PARSONS: Ed Hirsch's writing impacted me a lot. Ted Hughes, not his form, but his ability to come at a subject from someplace you would just never believe. And his images are so incredible. And older poets like Yeats, of course. Some of Wallace Stevens' stuff is stunning, and I use one of Wallace Stevens' poems to introduce poetry, even though I don't like the poem that much, "Antecedote of the Jar." Richard Wilbur—some of his stuff, not all of it. He has a poem entitled, "The Writer" which is my favorite poem

for teaching poetry. It's got everything that you want to talk about the first time you sit down with people to talk about what makes a poem a poem.

CALLIOPE: You said you wrote a lot of bad poems, at what point did you say, "this is good?"

PARSONS: I'm still writing bad poems. For one thing, you start to notice things that get published. You send all this stuff out, and you think you know what you like, but they may surprise you when they choose something. So I have to say, publishing is problematic, but one of things where I think people

57

make mistakes is when they send stuff out. They send stuff to places they want to be published in. But they don't think: "Is this poem really for that? Who's reading this poem? I think that I recognized that in myself when I first started sending stuff out, so I became a lot smarter about that.

CALLIOPE: When you write, do you start with an idea you want to convey, or do you let the ideas flow from the writing?

PARSONS: I start with image, when some image strikes me. I'll be driving down the road, and I'll think of an image or see an image and just write it down, and that opens the portal to the poem. For "The Texian," the poem I had to do for the Flag Park, I read three books about Texas history. I could teach that subject now. And, believe me, the story of Texas independence is not anything like you think it is. It's really a lot more interesting and a lot more unbelievable how we got to be a nation before a state. The people involved are the most interesting people. I recommend one book in particular, *The Texas Iliad*, which is a wonderful book about Texas history and which gives insights into the people and the battle.

CALLIOPE: One last question: This is a big question. You're so active on the poetry scene. What do you see as the role of poetry in contemporary society?

PARSONS: Poetry has developed through academia. It used to be that people went out and experienced the world and wrote poems, but now most of the respected poetry is coming through writing programs. It's been institutionalized, and it has the institution at its center, rather than being grassroots, which is what I think we need to try to reinstitute. I'm not against academics, though. I think that's what creates informed readers. If MFA programs do nothing else, they create informed readers, which creates a market for small press books. So to me that's fantastic. I wouldn't have three books if it wasn't for a small press or these programs. But for it to be the way it used to be—where it becomes a fabric of our society, for how we behave, for decision making and politics—it's got to make that leap to not being looked at institutionally. I don't know what to do about it, but I do think more academic poets need to take risks with what they write about.

CALLIOPE: Thank you for being with us and sharing your wisdom today.

PARSONS: My pleasure. Thank you for having me.

58